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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000411

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM LE SY  
SUBJECT: SYRIAN REACTIONS TO JUNE 2009 LEBANESE ELECTIONS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 194  
B. DAMASCUS 252  
C. DAMASCUS 363  
D. DAMASCUS 377

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Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (S) Summary: Many of our contacts were surprised by the margin of March 14's impressive electoral victory over March 18. Press reporting prior to the election had fed expectations of a much closer race, and most Syrian observers were predicting a March 8 win. President Asad reportedly called his Lebanese counterpart on June 10 to congratulate him and praise Lebanese consensus that would be "necessary to face and deal with the forthcoming challenges." On June 8, Presidential Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban expressed "relief" that the elections had taken a "safe and stable course," and she encouraged a "spirit of reconciliation" among Lebanese parties. Our contacts suggested that the Syrian government privately supports Hezbollah's claim that the Doha Accord requires a national consensus government with a blocking third of seats in the Council of Ministers. A few Embassy sources suggested many Syrians would view the elections as a blow to Syria's prestige while others would see positive elements. Syria's "restraint" would help to improve Syrian-Saudi and Syrian-Lebanese relations, for example. As one well-connected Syrian journalist put it, the West could no longer accuse Syria with interfering in Lebanon; in that light, the March 14 victory offered an "opportunity" for Western powers to publicly acknowledge Syria's hands-off policy toward Lebanon. End Summary.

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Official and Media Reactions  
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12. (SBU) Official Syrian reactions to Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections have been limited thus far to a terse

statement by Presidential Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban and a brief public statement derived from President Asad's June 10 call to Lebanese President Sleiman. Asad reportedly congratulated Sleiman and praised the spirit of Lebanese consensus that "is necessary to face and deal with the forthcoming challenges." On June 8, Shaaban convoked reporters and told them Lebanon's June 7 elections were "an internal matter." She expressed "relief" the elections had taken a "safe and stable course" and encouraged Lebanese parties to exercise a "spirit of reconciliation."

¶3. (SBU) A day earlier, the Syrian government's message was more provocative. An editorial in government-owned daily "Al Baath" reported that U.S.-backed March 14 "has been accused of having bought votes and using bribery," adding that "this could pave the way to large-scale falsification of the elections." Similarly, Syrian daily "al-Watan," the country's only privately owned newspaper, characterized the elections as "The most important political ballot in Lebanon's history . . . and politically-tainted money has had the last word." Al-Watan claimed "Election cash played a decisive role in the election result, because March 14 loyalists allocated a huge budget for vote-buying, for spending money in the polling booths . . . and in bringing expatriates (to Lebanon) to vote." The paper concluded these measures had fundamentally altered election day results when compared to opinion poll predictions a few days before the vote.

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Surprise over Margin of Victory  
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¶4. (S) A wide range of Embassy contacts with whom we spoke expressed surprise not just over the election's outcome, but over the wide margin of the March 14 coalition's victory. Basil Hamwi (strictly protect), head of Audi Bank operations in Syria and a well-connected businessman with political ties in both Syria and Lebanon, explained that many Syrian elites had expected the elections to be decided by a margin of a seat or two, and the most recently polling had predicted March 8 would win. "We went to bed with March 8 clinging to a narrow lead and woke up to a March 14 landslide," he commented. Hamwi discounted Syrian press accounts claiming vote buying, saying "that's Lebanon." Like many other contacts, however, he noted that the unprecedented voter turnout was a key factor in determining the outcome. "It means March 14's machinery was better oiled than March 8's was," Hamwi commented in front of a small, informal group of private Syrian and Lebanese businessmen. Heads nodded in agreement.

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Different Interpretations over Elections' Significance  
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¶5. (S) Perceptions differed over how this outcome reflected on the Syrian government and its policies. Al-Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi (strictly protect) depicted a wide range of Syrian equities at stake. The security services had the most to lose because a strong March 14 showing would suggest a reduction of Syrian national prestige and influence in Lebanon. Politically, it was too soon to tell whether March 14's victory would translate into results that might alter the Syrian regime's standing, he said.

¶6. (C) The elections, whatever the flaws, represented a message from the Lebanese Christian community to Hizballah, assessed Hamidi. Many Syrians -- Sunnis included -- quietly held similar concerns about Hizballah's aggressive posture, especially at a time when the Syrian regime was trying to

improve relations with the West. Hamidi believed that Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah's concession of defeat had been a positive move that should make it easier for reconciliation inside Lebanon. The Syrian regime favored such a process, he said, because it allowed Syria to remain "disengaged" from Lebanese internal affairs. Hamidi warned, however, that the appointment of March 14 leader Saad Hariri as Prime Minister would motivate Syrian hard-liners to adopt a more confrontational posture. "Because Hariri has made direct accusations against the Asad regime for the assassination of his father (Rafiq), many in Damascus would view his ascent to the Prime Ministry as a direct challenge to Asad," Hamidi cautioned.

¶7. (S) Syrian daily "al-Watan" Editor-in-Chief Waddah abd Rabo (strictly protect) said there had been a range of reactions within the Syrian regime. While no one was happy that March 14 had won by such a large margin, the prevailing view appeared to be that the elections themselves would do little to change political dynamics in Lebanon. Even considering March 14's impressive electoral victory, no March 14-led government could afford to ignore the fact that Hizballah's political strength had grown in recent years. In the end, there would be very tough negotiations ahead between Lebanon's two major political coalitions. Hizballah was now insisting on adherence to the Doha Accord's stipulation of a blocking third in the Lebanese Council of Ministers, while March 18 leader Saad Hariri was arguing against it. (Note: Syrian journalists have pointed out to us that subsequent press remarks on June 10 by Nasrallah's deputy, Sheik Naim

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Qasim, omitted any mention of a blocking third and focused on the need for a consensus, unity government. Some observers in Damascus are suggesting this line may represent a moderation of Nasrallah's earlier demands.)

¶8. (S) Presidential Advisor Shaaban, abd Rabo reported, had called in Syrian reporters on June 7 to brief them on Syria's reaction to the Lebanese election. Her tone had been measured, but it belied her personal views that the outcome in Lebanon "had been a PR disaster for Syria," abd Rabo said. Her reaction contrasted with the view of the MFA and others that, despite March 14's lop-sided victory, the election would actually benefit Syria in two specific ways.

¶9. (S) First, it would allow Syria to demonstrate it had made good on its bargain with Saudi Arabia not to "grossly interfere" in the elections. Indeed, abd Rabo observed, President Asad had called Saudi King Abdullah the day after the elections to talk about the elections and bilateral relations. Second, March 14's convincing win provided "irrefutable evidence" against Western claims that Syria was interfering in Lebanese politics. "Now, the West can't accuse Syria of interfering in Lebanon any more," he claimed.

Syria's restraint during the elections, abd Rabo added, should help Syria in its efforts to improve relations with the U.S. "The U.S. could score major points with Syria if someone like Mitchell pointed publicly to Syria's positive behavior," he suggested.

¶10. (S) Comment: President Asad and FM Muallim have emphasized in recent meetings with U.S. officials that Syria supported a free and fair election in Lebanon, but they also argued that a consensus Lebanese government would be the only way to preserve Lebanese stability (refs A-D). Since March 14's decisive victory, Syrian officials and the official media have stopped short of insisting on the Doha Accord's provision for a blocking third minority in the Lebanese Council of Ministers. We sense, however, that the Syrian government will seek to preserve the Doha Accord's arrangements for a blocking third as a way to restrain the next March 14-led government. At the same time, Syrian officials will not hesitate to make the case that Syria's "hands-off" posture made good on its pledge not to interfere in the elections and represented another (and still publicly

unrecognized) Syrian deliverable to the West.

¶11. (S) Comment continued: Internally, Syrian regime hard-liners, particularly the security services, are licking their wounds over the June 7 results. Regime loyalists can claim the SARG held up its part of the bargain with the Saudis by not interfering to Syria's full potential, but conservative elements believe the lop-sided election results represented a loss of face. As a result, there may be pressure on the security services to increase their efforts to influence Lebanon's government formation process in the short-term. For regime moderates, the pressure will be on to demonstrate the tangible benefits of appearing to be more restrained in Lebanon. Sitting above the internal fray, Bashar appears ready to make the best of the situation by mending fences with Saudi Arabia and by hoping Washington will give Damascus some credit for not obstructing the will of the Lebanese people.

CONNELLY